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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000563

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/24/2016

TAGS: [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: HARIRI AND JUMBLATT DISCUSS STRATEGY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: 1.4 (d).

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

¶1. (S) On February 23, while waiting for Secretary Rice to arrive for a meeting with MP Saad Hariri and MP Walid Jumblatt at his house in Beirut, econoff and FSN senior political specialist were invited to sit with these two leaders. The small talk with FSN senior political specialist eventually turned into a discussion of the March 14 Coalition's strategy. The exchange also rendered insights into Hariri's and Jumblatt's attitudes. Jumblatt suggested to Hariri that Aoun could be brought into the March 14 coalition's efforts to unseat President Emile Lahoud by allowing Aoun to nominate the next president as long as it wasn't himself. Hariri dismissed the idea because he believed Aoun would pick someone unacceptable. Hariri saw no way that Aoun could become a partner but was optimistic that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri would assist in removing Lahoud. Jumblatt said that he thought former MP Nassib Lahoud was a good candidate. Jumblatt was intensely interested in who might be the candidates for the 2008 US presidential elections, believing that Syria and its Lebanese allies were trying to outlast the current U.S. administration. On a personal level, Hariri mentioned that he enjoys scuba diving and cave diving. Body language during the discussion suggested a relationship of equals between the two men. End introduction and summary.

AOUN AS "GODFATHER"

¶2. (S) In a 2/23 informal discussion with econoff and FSN senior political specialist, MP Saad Hariri and MP Walid Jumblatt openly discussed strategy prior to a visit by Secretary Rice at Jumblatt's house in Beirut. Hariri was

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concerned that the recent Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq would cause tensions to rise in Lebanon and delay his push to remove President Emile Lahoud. Nonetheless, Hariri said that he would continue the slow build-up to oust Lahoud. Jumblatt was equally concerned, noting that a "balance of political terror" now existed between the March 14 Coalition and Hizballah. Hariri was confident that he could gain Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's support for efforts to remove Lahoud. "He is easy to bring in," said Hariri. He even thought there was a chance Hizballah could be persuaded. MP Michel Aoun, sighed Hariri, was the real problem. Aoun believes that "it is him or nobody else" for the presidency.

¶3. (S) Thinking out loud, Jumblatt asked Hariri about a compromise wherein Aoun would be the "godfather" of the next

president. It was apparent by Hariri's expression that Jumblatt had not raised this idea before. Hariri asked Jumblatt what he meant. Jumblatt replied that Aoun could name the next president as long as it wasn't Aoun. Hariri dismissed the idea, joking that Aoun would "choose someone crazy" like Gibran Bassil (son-in-law, senior advisor, and sycophant to Aoun). "Who else is there?" asked Jumblatt rhetorically, listing MP Boutros Harb, Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad, and former MP Nassib Lahoud. Jumblatt said that Nassib Lahoud was a good man and seemed to endorse him. When asked if Nassib Lahoud's electoral defeat last year precluded him from being nominated president, Jumblatt replied that it would be a problem, but it was only a tradition.

ATTENTION TO US ELECTIONS

14. (S) Jumblatt was intensely interested in who might run in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. He was convinced that Syria and its Lebanese allies were planning to outlast the current U.S. administration. Jumblatt added that "hopefully you guys will remove" Syrian President Bashar al-Asad from power before 2008. "We are counting on you guys."

LEADERSHIP NOTES

15. (S) Hariri revealed that he thoroughly enjoyed scuba diving in caves. He was amazed by the fish and scenery he sees inside caves. He does not cave dive in Lebanon because the water is too polluted. Hariri also expressed interest in scuba diving in the sea, noting that he preferred the Red Sea. He mentioned that he had fed sharks on his diving trips. Saying that he disliked elevators, Hariri mentioned

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that King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia also hates elevators. King Abdallah had escalators installed in his palaces, according to Hariri. Where he must have an elevator, King Abdallah insisted that it be designed with windows. Hariri thought that King Abdallah might be claustrophobic.

16. (S) Jumblatt, donning a suit for his meeting with the Secretary in place of his customary jeans and sport coat,

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said that this was the first time he had been to his Beirut house in about a year. The house displayed a mix of Middle Eastern, Far Eastern, and European decorations and furniture as well as a painting of Jumblatt and his late father. Hariri sat in the most honored seat, but the exchange and body language of the two men suggested a partnership of equals even though Hariri led a far larger Sunni community than Jumblatt's Druze.

FELTMAN